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# Chapter 1

"RiverClan, retreat! Retreat!"

I am back to the present at Floodwater's urgent call, his eyes filled with worry. With a small sigh, I can't help but hide the oblivious frustration at our apparent cowardice, the feeling threatening to consume me. But I won't defy my deputy. That would be like writing a death wish and delivering it directly to his den. Complete and utter idiocy in all forms that it can be perceived. And so, with a final glance of shame over my shoulder at the ground soaked with blood from both of our parties, I reluctantly follow after the tails of my Clan mates headed away from the warm, sunny rocks previously filled with our loyal soldiers.

Failure is all I can conclude from what was supposed to be a leap of victory for the well being of our Clan, and a mixture of guilt and worry flushes my face and spreads heat through my cheeks at the thought of how Echostar will have a later reaction to our attempted claim of territory. My pads are caked with dried blood that will soon generate into scabs, and with each step I lean my weight onto I can feel a stab of pain shoot through me like every leaf I trod on is the point of a needle. All of the pressure and current pain adds up into a ball of stress that I honestly can assure anyone to question that I won't be able to survive this. My first battle as an official apprentice prepared to serve resulted in a flop. I still can't comprehend how we lost to those skinny ThunderClan rookies. They're hardly as good as we are, and their warriors have nothing better to do than sit around waiting for the next house cat to wander into their border and train as an apprentice. However, I suspect it has something to do with the fact that they had too much weakness to handle us. They had to call their entire Clan to aid them in order to outnumber our patrol of few cats! It was a pathetic display of cowardice, and I am ashamed for ever even making eye contact with one of those inexperienced, black hearted, brainless, wiggly little amateurs.

Brushing through the tall stalks of cat tails at the entrance to camp, I veer away from the where Minnowleap and her apprentice are steadily treating the wounds of my injured Clan mates. I hardly have a scratch to taint my dark tabby stripes. and I currently have no desire to waste any time or herbs on my feeble boo boos. Instead, I head to where my friends and siblings are huddled in a crowd, awaiting our return.

"You lost?" Heronpaw sighs, not even bothering to hide the disappointment that is clear in her voice. I nod tenderly, trying my best to to upset her to a further level of depression that she is experiencing. Her twin, Storkpaw, jabs me hard in the nose with his foot.

"Shame on you, Lostpaw! We expected more of you." He is shooting me a mock stare of accusatory blame that I know isn't serious, but I can't help but feel shame pulling my heart from my chest into my stomach.

I cock my head at him, studying his white pelt. The only hint of anything to invade the angelic shade of his fur is the gray on his paws. "If I remember correctly, I was chosen to even go. And you...weren't."

Pursing his lips with the despair at accepting the defeat that has come to him, Storkpaw sends a scowl my way. "Thanks Lostpaw. That did a number on my self esteem."

"I'm here for you."

"I know, love."

Sometimes I can't stand how flirtatious he is, how he bends me in directions I never thought he could. This strange cat causes me to feel things that are intrusions to my usual calm, collected self that I have known for so long. He drives me insane, but it's in a way that isn't agitating, or annoying to even a soul as oriented as mine. He leaves me wondering why, wondering how be can bring out the tricks in me, the teasing in me, the fun side of me that I was doubtful even existed to this world I love in of struggle and blood flow. But I like it. I like the me who admits to dangers that the

other half of myself would never find acceptable. I like the me that sees it as an option to flirt back with him, toy with him like he does to me, like he is a puppet master and I am held up by strings of unconstrained giddiness. I don't mind that he looks forward to the part of his day when he can play with me, dangle me by loose strings that won't be cut. Because the way he does it is a way that I like.

"If you two lovebirds are done making your nest, can we please get the others and have a real conversation?" Heronpaw doesn't bother to hide her growl, as is an often result of her moody personality.

"Oh, we aren't done yet. Now, Lostpaw darling, will you pass me that twig? I need to set a foundation here!" Storkpaw rolls his eyes at me in mock distress, gesturing towards the apparent stick lying next to me. I can't help but giggle a little, walking past him to flock the retreating Heronpaw.

As I push through the heavily build entrance to my den -- our den, I can't help but notice the increasing size of apprentices RiverClan has had recently. And with more kittens on their way, the warriors will soon have to get working on expanding the size. The tips of top of the messily built den brush against my ears as I duck under the low hanging entrance, and I am immediately bombed with instant questions by the newer apprentices.

"What was it like?"

"What did they smell like?"

"Did we win?"

"Are you hurt?"

"Whoa, back up! Princess coming through," Storkpaw calls out to the gathered group. I laugh, just a little, as I shove through enough diverse colors of pelts to fill a palette of paint. But I'm followed, much to my dismay, as exhaustion begins to creep up from my aching pads to my eyelids, and I am starting to feel like there are heavy weights bearing down on the skin above my gray eyes. With an obvious yawn to send a sign to the gathering around me, I dig

around in my nest a little before snuggling deep into the dry, cracking moss terrain So maybe it's not the most comfortable thing in the world. And maybe I wished I could have somewhere to rest my head in a non-awkward situation, like a cushion of bedding for a pillow. But it's still my home. And keep get to sleep next to my silly, punk of a best friend every night. So it's okay.

I glance over in his direction as he continues to ramble on, cracking jokes that force the smiles to emerge won to the faces of the others around me, and I smile. I love my friends.

And right before I drift into a land where anything is possible, where I'm an acceptable being to my neglecting parents, I think to myself: my life is pretty great, despite the hardships that I face.

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Storkpaw is poking me impatiently, and my attempts to shove him away are in vain. And so, my eyes still glazed over from the sleep trying to drag me back, I wake up. His eyes, so vibrantly blue, are filled with emotion, with a passion that I find beautiful. *He* is beautiful, and my mind is wayward, wandering from where I am supposed to be right now. One day, some she cat will be filled with joy at being his mate. I almost envy her, this unknown persona for who will be his future, his love. Almost.

"Lostpaw, would you get up already?"

The urgency in his voice scares me, and I can't help but wonder what could possibly be worrying him. Storkpaw is never worried, never expressive in any feeling he dares to express to the public willing to listen to him. "What's wrong?" My eyes are narrowed, as water is blurring my line of vision. It seems that sleep just won't leave me alone.

"You'd better get out here. It's...bad. Really bad."

And like that, I'm awake. For when tension is risen, when worries or troubles are at hand, the usually sarcastic, goofy tom that is my best friend is always the one to make a joke out of the situation. Dark spots are waving in and out of my eyes, and for a second I am

blinded by my quick action to rise from the ground. I stand in one place, dizzy, as I try to recalibrate and get a sense of my surroundings again. But, an added trait to his personality, Storkpaw is not a patient cat, and he is tugging me by my ear out of the den.

As I slowly regain my vision, I notice that I am the only one who was still asleep, and I wonder why Heronpaw didn't get me up. She's usually the first to rise, and the first to get anyone else who dares to sleep I. her presence awake as well. But as I glance around the crowded camp, I can see that she is bent over, her shoulders heaving as she is hyperventilating, struggling to find air. She is sobbing.

There is a body in the middle of the crowd of gathered cats. Shoot. A body. Who could have possibly died in the short time between yesterday and now? Only a few hours marked that the day was changing, and already someone was dead? But as I look closer, I can see that the bloody mess of cat is still breathing. They are still alive, and this observation is relieving to me.

But I glance over at Storkpaw, and his lip is trembling. "What is it, Storkpaw?" He is the last cat I would think of to be upset at someone else's demise.

"That's...Floodwater."

Floodwater. Our deputy. Storkpaw and Heronpaw's father. I can feel the blood rush out of me, and suddenly I think I've collapsed onto the floor. I am a pile of bones with a barely breathing heart. I think I'm dying, or I'm already dead. My best friend's dad is dying, if he's not already dead. So I guess this something we both have in common. For thinking about humor in a time like this I am ashamed of myself, and change my course of thought immediately. There's no way injuries that could possibly be mended, even with the highly trained paws of Minnowleap and Stormfoot working for his case. Speak of the devil. Minnowleap is shoving her way through the crowd, her eyes showing worry for the deputy's fate, and anger for the cats who refuse to budge and let her through. Far less forceful than the rampaging medicine cat, Stormfoot trails along behind her, his judgment clouded by the lack of emotion that I can't see in his eyes.

"Make way, you stupid cats! I need to get to him!" The dark colored medicine cat is shooting insults like bullets at the cats in the crowd, as if her sharp tongue will bend the stiff cats to her will. However, the shock has reciprocated around the crowd like fire, and soon everyone is staring. Staring and refusing to move, refusing to do anything. It's sickening to me. I can't watch as the blood forms a pool around Floodwater's previously identical white fur to his son. It's like seeing the older version of Storkpaw bleed to drag. And I can't do that. I can't.

I instead focus my attention to where Tadpolestar is overseeing the situation at hand, his eyes in moving as he watches every move that Minnowleap makes, as though he is assessing her, making sure she us acceptable. Sometimes my very leader terrifies me, as he shows absolutely no emotion and is retreated to the far end of his cave most of the day. His interaction with any of the members of the Clan is short, and the most any of us hear him talk are during the naming ceremonies. It makes me wonder what he is doing all day, what can possibly be happening while he is holed up in his cave.

My glare must be burning into his black pelt, for his gaze wavers, and them shifts to stare into my eyes. I don't avert my watch, I don't stand down, and neither does he. His face, motionless. Emotionless. His eyes...so intense. They're burning me, searing my skin, my fur, until I swear that the cats sitting next to me can smell the putrid scent of my fur rapidly dissolving. I have to break the stare, the analysis of wills, of strength, and let him win. Just this once.

Never again.

# Chapter 2

Floodwater has been in Minnowleap's den for hours, and Storkpaw has refused every offer I have given him to get him to move, to budge, to let go of his father who we both know isn't going to be out of there for a while. No one is aware of what has happened to him yet, how he was so insanely scarred beyond belief that he is still unconscious. The only signs to alert the world of his living soul are the shallow, rattling breaths that he inhalers to keep his blood flowing into his heart, out of his wounds. To keep his lungs expanding, clogging with blood and shutting down for another few seconds. His physical state is as battered up as Storkpaw's mental one.

Shallowpool, his mate, is hysterical. She's been blubbering all day, worried for his sake, unable to regain her composure and return to the living world where her Clan needs her. She and her son have been huddled at the entrance, her sobbing and her identical kit completely still, unmoving, barely blinking. It's as if he has the wild idea that a single blink will crush more of his father's bones, will make the blood pool around him quicker, will make him die at a quicker rate than he already is.

But my mind is wandering to a separate subject, one that has received far less credit than it's important is worth. Our deputy's apprentice still hasn't returned from whatever lethal she and her mentor set off to. Honeypaw is still out there somewhere, dead or alive, or in the state he is in, unaware...unconscious. It gives me chills to let my mind hover over the fact, let my thoughts stray into imagining the real. That she wasn't found when the dawn patrol stumbled across his body. That she wasn't there, isn't there; is probably dead somewhere else, and doesn't have the decency to come to Stormfoot in a dream and prophecy to him what revolutionary thing managed to harm Floodwater and possibly murder her. I thought that was the job of "StarClan" cats, and this only deepens my suspicions that the so-called dead ancestral Clan doesn't actually exist. Though it would shock my religious friends

into giving me scorn and rejecting me, I haven't ever believed in StarClan.

So my question to all of they'll followers to this supposed "StarClan" that is so frequently worshipped and cherished among my Clan is, where are those trusty dead souls now? And if they are just spirits, why do they take the form and exact appearance of merely earth bodies, like I've been taught in the few lessons my parents cared enough to tell me of? Why would ancient cats with the lower to foresee destinies and predict ridiculous prophecies still wield their scars from their earthly lives? Why don't they use their special powers t completely cleanse themselves of wrong imprinted onto their physical forms? Why stay imperfect, when perfection is so easily obtained after the life we are all living? So, no. I don't sieve in this StarClan nonsense. But no cat could even try to question my loyalty and devotion to my birth clan. That would be an act of idiocy to even try to make that claim.

As the family of Floodwater mourns his wounds, I veer from where they are huddled, my paws leading me elsewhere. And even though Storkpaw may need me, and I may be acting like a bad friend for not soothing hum and trying to cause him some comfort about the tragedy, I can't help but know for a fact that nothing I would say would help him. Nothing I can say will make it all better, will change his opinion or his view on the situation. Because as much as I want to tell him it'll be okay, and everything will turn out all right, I don't even know that myself. So why would I lie to my friend?

Tadpolestar is staring at me again, his ears erect, alert to the words that enter my range of hearing and edit my mouth. He's always watching us, all of us, tracking our movements with his eyes if ice, if bitterness and pale emotions that have been leaked of all their color and personality. He's a strange cat of a mysterious background that I long to know, am desperate to discover and unravel the ivy vines of secrets woven into him, in between the truth and lies. I want to experience who he really is, to comprehend the shadows that darken the space behind him, to worm my way through the foul enmity that is protruding from where he conceal himself for hours in a day. I wish to know him, discover him, learn the depths

of his past that may have aided in the shaping of his perspective on the world. I want to uncover him, dif the dirt out from here it has been buried. I want to know him.

He is watching me again. His black eyes of untold stories of cruelty and pain. His black fur, a reminder of the lack of insight that he has let us explore from the history of him before he was known as our leader. Before he was the supreme commander of the Clan we know today. The world we are walking in. Before he was feared beyond belief. Before RiverClan claimed it's rightful throne as the most terrorizing, nightmare inducing choice of taking on that the land has seen before. Because Tadpolestar isn't a leader to any of us. He isn't one to console about problems of concern within the personal lives of his warriors, his cats. He's a dictator. And he's still watching me.

But now, he's smiling a cold, heartless smile of wrath and kind deception.

Our leader never smiles.

# Chapter 3

"Storkpaw, I'm so sorry." My words are full of despair for the tragedy he has been trying so hard to endure, but I can tell that this is eating away at him, at his dignity and his stability of mind. He offers me a small smile for closure, and he is so brave. *And those eyes...so blue and beautiful, beautiful, beautiful.*

"I know." His words, so soft, his lips so sure of the words they are saying, not swaying from their position of absolute surety in the things they are hiding from me and the world. But his eyes, the shadows below his eyelids concealing days of sleeplessness, of tears that want to fall but never would. And I'm sorry, so sorry, and I wish I can take his pain away and ease the burden that is pushing against his shoulder blades and causing his usual straight posture to sag when he walks, stands, moves.

I feel so awful, like somehow I could have prevented this tragedy from befalling him and the family I so dearly, so desperately love. The family that replaced the parents who never cared for me because I was only a product of a one night stand. Stupid cats. Stupid parents.

Why did the deputy have to be injured so early on into Storkpaw's life? Death can be mentally damaging to a young cat of my or his age, and I would really love for my best friend to remain sane for his life.

"Lostpaw!" Hallowshade is calling me, trotting towards me at a fast pace. Lovely. My mentor is just the cat I wished to see at this moment, the stupid lazy butt. We never do any actual training. Our sessions of battle practice involve him sitting in a tree poking dead birds while I work my tail off to perfect movies I've only seen in battle, as learning them aren't possible with the stupid tom I was stuck with. Hunting is him sitting by the river and watching fish swim around, criticizing me while I fall into its cold, swirling pools of sorrow and bitter freeze, trying to catch those fast fish. I hate Hallowshade. He's just too stupid to realize it. And so as he

approaches me, I roll my eyes and try not to look him in the eye, gagging on the inside as his breath smells like rotting fish.

"What." It's not a question, it's a statement. I am stating how disappointed I am to see him again, and how I really would like to know what work he is going to put me through.

"We're on patrol. Tadpolestar called for a border patrol." He leaned in close and I held my breath, that rank fish odor causing me tears to well up in my tiny little tearducts. "But between you and me," he began. *Don't breathe don't breathe don't breathe.* "I think this patrol is just an excuse to search for Honeypaw. I bet he's worried about her."

How stupid could this cat be? The leader could care less about her. The less cats in the Clan, the less cats for him to overthrow. "Mm-hm. That's *totally* what he wants." To my lack of surprise, Hallowshade nodded. But really, first we were going on a patrol, we may as well search for Honeypaw. I didn't know her personally as she was one of the newer apprentices along with Butterflypaw, her sister, and her brothers Fishpaw, Duskpaw, and Sourpaw. They were crushed at her disappearance, and if I could make their day happier those were four less depressed apprentices that I could cross off of my list of six, including Heronpaw and Storkpaw.

It seems as though, speak of the devil, Tadpolestar would beheading this patrol. That was strange. We never saw him, apart from when he had to promote a kit to an apprentice or an apprentice to a warrior. He was rarely at gatherings, and normally the deputy would take over his duties of reporting RiverClan's news. But of a sudden he would be joining measly peasants, very unimportant in comparison to his secret work, on a border patrol? Strange. But life is strange, and life's dwellers are strange, so therefore I am strange. And now I'm a hypocrite.

Tadpolestar approaches me, his mouth rid of that home chilling grin, finally. But I am not fully in reassurance, as his eyes are locked into mine and he is still watching me. I hate it when he watches me. His eyes bore into mine as they know all, they see all, they are terrifying and cruel and full of misconceptions and imperfections, of corrections and newfound perfections. And it makes no sense, is

what I think as I stare into his eyes that are green one day and blue the next, it makes no sense that his eyes can give away so much about him yet conceal much more. How can I see a lot and know so little? I can see pain, and misery, and hardships, and trials all woven into the creases between his eyes, the dilated irises, the redness of being too weary to walk. He's strong. He's unforgiving. He is my leader. But he still terrifies me.

I watch his lithe form slide to the front of our group like a snake, and I can envision him growing fangs as he lunges for the unsuspecting Hallowshade. He would sink those fangs into the tom's back, spreading blood on the ground and poison coursing through his veins. And I want to scream, to warn Hallowshade that a snake is about to murder him, to rip him from existence, until I remember that I don't care about him. He can die. Then I can get a new mentor, and that could be good. I could finally learn something one day.

But it turns out that he is going to love another day, survive another training session as Tadpolestar slips right past him, his snake body folding in ways I didn't know were possible for a mere cat. And suddenly I think he doesn't have any bones in that body of his. No bones or a heart. This cat really can't be believed. But I tear my gaze away from him and cast one more longing look at Storkpaw, feeling so sorry for him and wanting to help him yet being unable to at the same time. It's so sad, this reality. Where death and disappearances are happening all the time, and more are just around the corner. And I'm just about to turn my head back to the front and ready myself for the patrol, when something happens.

WindClan bursts through the entrance.

# Chapter 4

**a.n . Thank you so much for all the lovely comments to anyone who has ever posted a comment, read my story, or voted for it. I love you all so much! Special thanks to @ Slushie16 and @ Nutpelt , who have been here since the start!! :)**

Orchidstar is at the entrance, her eyes wild with worry. There is blood, so much blood, as it covers her body and blinds her vision from its regular purity and perfection. Her pale, cream fur that looks like it is pink in the dawn light is now nothing but maroon and dripping with wetness. She is panting like a dog, her knees shaking and her legs threatening to buckle. "T-Tad...pole..." She stutters out the prefix to our leader's name before her front half can't deal with  the weight and the weakness and she collapses, bending her legs and staring up at him with complete and utter desperation.

Tadpolestar stands still with a cool expression on his face. The worry he has for her is minimal, if any, and is veering on the edge of being pure neglect. He leans down to stare at her face, hardly even blinking when she accidentally coughs up blood onto his neat and tidy pelt.

Our leader straightens up, staring disdainfully down his nose at Orchidstar. "Spit it out, then. What do you want?"

"We-we're being attacked." As the WindClan leader speaks, blood sputters out of her mouth. "Help...please."

Tadpolestar quirks an eyebrow, watching her visibly die in front of him. He looks very judgmental, and it makes me quiver with rage. As if that would never happen to him. As if he is so much higher than her. As if he's *better* than her. I hate my leader. "So you're being attacked." He repeats her phrase carefully, cocking his head and tasting the words on his tongue. He clicks his tongue pensively, and I want to rip him apart. How could he do this to her?

Orchidstar coughs again, and another bubble of blood streams from her mouth. Her eyes are wide and she is looking up at Tadpolestar pleadingly. So much so that I bet if she could stand properly right now, she'd be on the ground kissing his paws. It sickens me. "Please...Ta-" Her words are cut short as a shake racks her body.

"Let me just ask you one question," Tadpolestar says after what seems like an eternity of pausing. "What is in it for me?"

My eyes widen even more. How could he even ask that question? He is watching Orchidstar die in front of him, with no idea if she has more than one life left in her, and he's asking what is in it for him? How could he be so selfish? How did this dictator of a cat become a leader over a respectable Clan like ours?

"Y-you can have....have anything you want. Please...please..."

This seems to spark Tadpolestar's interest. His eyes light up and his tail quivers, just a bit. Bending down so that he's closer to her face, his stony expression breaks, just a bit, as the corner of his mouth twitches upwards. He's enjoying this. "And why ask RiverClan? Why not, say, ThunderClan? You seem to be best friends with those filthy half-blooded excuses for warriors."

Usually Orchidstar would stand up for ThunderClan. After all, WindClan and ThunderClan have always been close. At least to the extent of the knowledge of the other Clans. But she doesn't even frown. I think she's too weak. "I...sent a warrior...to request...their help." She heaves a bit, her breaths raspier than ever. She needs medical help. "They...they denied it."

What?

ThunderClan denied? That makes no sense.

Tadpolestar rises up, his tail twitching. He stares down at the pitiful, bloodied mess that was once the honorable WindClan leader, licking his lips. "Fine. I will in exchange for one thing."

"Anything."

"Your current queens? I want one of their kits."

# Taking OC Requests! c:

Hey guys! So, I may not be the most popular writer on Wattpad, but for those of you who do read my works (LOVE YOU!!), I have decided that I will be taking requests for me to insert your guys's OCs into the story! I think it'd be fun if you all felt a little more involved, so yup! To get your own OC warrior into the story, just use this form provided below.

Cat's Name:

Gender:

Appearance:

Personality:

Clan:

Rank:

Family:

Importance in the story (Main character, side character, friend of ___, etc.):

Relationship to Lostpaw (Friend, crush, none, etc.):

Mentor/Apprentice (if any):

Mate/Kits (if any):

Other:

So yeah! Go ahead and fill out the form to be a part of the story! :)

# Chapter 5

"Wh-what? No! No . . . can't . . ."

Tadpolestar shrugs, his face impassive. Cracking his neck as he rolls his shoulders casually, he sits down with complete relaxation. He's so calm and composed about this situation. I've never hated anyone more. Who would ask for someone's child in return for their help with a raid? "Your choice," he muses. "I suppose this is goodbye, then. Your Clan doesn't stand a chance." What a snake. I don't know why I can't just see the venom dripping through his veins and filling up the empty pit that he has for a heart.

Orchidstar is close to breaking down. I can see it in the way her mouth is agape and her eyes are foggy. She can't stand this any longer, can't stand his manipulation and his games. I don't blame her; I feel the same way. "T . . . Tadp-please. Please!" She is mustering all of her remaining strength into shouting his name, begging for his help.

And then I do something that I thought I never would. I step forward, to Tadpolestar's side. "Can't you see she's dying? We need to *help* her!" That's what I say. Or, what I think I was supposed to say. It comes out as more of a "Sh-she's dying. W-we need, uh, help. Her. H-help her." I can't help if he terrifies me. Maybe that's why we all follow him; he's intimidated us into submission.

His icy eyes are on me now, and my heart is speeding up as quickly as the WindClan leader's is slowing down.

"Did you say something, Lostpaw?" The way he tilts his head while speaking my name sends a chill down my spine, and my hackles raise.

I flatten my ears, lowering my head and looking away, breaking the gaze between us. I don't even know why. I can't stand what a coward I am right now. It makes me want to smack myself, but I can't help not meeting his eyes now. They're still boring into me.

He's trying to make me stand down even more, to stop talking. He's trying to shut my mouth with his stare, using it like duct tape to smother my words and chains to tie my feet to the ground. But no. I won't let him will. I *will* speak my mind, if just to defy him."We . . . we need to help."

"And why should we do that?" That *voice*. It's such an awful drawl. He speaks slowly, enunciating every syllable and incorporating intonation in exactly the places that are the most effective for his methods of aggressive leadership.

"We have s-seven apprentices."

He straightens up, and I'm sure that his height is covering the sun from just how tall he is and how small I am in comparison. I have a thought that he may not be a cat at all, that he's a panther with fangs that are so long they pierce his lip whenever he shuts his mouth. And with a tail that is so powerful that each lash causes a tornado to whip up in its place. That seems about accurate to him. "We have seven apprentices, yes, but apprentices grow into warriors and those into elders. Just like my Clan should. I'm only looking out for RiverClan, Lostpaw. Why would you want to stop me?"

Now all eyes are on me, watching me to anticipate my answer. And I can feel my face reddening and am very grateful for the layers of fur covering it. Now whatever I say, I know they'll be judging me. All of them will. Because some way, somehow, they agree with him that I'm trying to stop him from benefitting the Clan. How does he do this? "N-no," I stutter.

I can hear Orchidstar's small noise of pained grief as I back down. I think she knows as wel as I do that I was her only hope, her only redemption from the snare in which she's currently caught. But I don't meet her eye. I can't. Then I know the guilt will just overshelm me, because I've allowed him to win. Why do I keep doing that?

"So, then." His chilling voice is back to the WindClan leader. He's back to torturing her with his question that she knows the answer to but can't bear to speak it. It's either one kit that a queen loses or the entire Clan that will be wiped out by the aggresors. "What'll it be?"

Her lip is trembling. She turns her head away from him, and as she opens her mouth a trickle of blood pools out of it. "I can't . . . bear to m-to make . . . queens suffer. My . . . my kits are due . . . soon."

"One of your children?" The intonation in the black leader's tone has changed. I can tell he's interested in this now, in taking away a child with a history that he can use to his advantage. I know he will, he'll be manipulative of this kit in some way once he or she arrives here. "That should work out perfectly." He cocks his head, a small smile forming at the edges of his mouth. But it's gone in a second, like it was never there. Turning his head, he calls out some familiar names. "Hallowshade, Turtlestep, Bluefur, Ebonywhisker, Minnowpaw, Storkpaw, Lostpaw, go help WindClan." His eyes search for us in the crowd. He pauses for a moment. "Stormfoot!"

The medicine cat apprentice pricks her ears as she hears her name barked from across the clearing. She bustles over to where we're all standing, obviously not as interested in the drama happening as she had been in her food. I can see bits of it in her teeth as she answers. "Yes?" Her voice is shaky and uncertain. I could never see her standing up to anyone.

"Patch up Orchidstar. We don't want anything happening to her precious children."

I bite my tongue so that I don't say something stupid. So he's suddenly worried abot her, as long as she has something to offer him?

Stormfoot nods, her eyes flickering in between the leader towering over her short, skinny figure and the injured in question. Sidestepping away from the RiverClan leader, still fixated on him as if he is a bear who's going to attack her the minute she turns her back. I don't blame her. Even if she's more of a coward than any of us, she has reason to be around him. I turn my eyes away as she leans down to offer the support of her weight to Orchidstar. I can see the rest of the ordered patrol clustering around the entrance. Preparing to leave, I'd guess.

As I join them, I nudge Storkpaw's shoulder gently. His eyes are glazed over, and at my touch he jolts awake as if from a nightmare.

"What?" The edge to his tone almost makes me reprimand him, but there's an obvious reason for his change in attitude. His father is dying. That's reason enough for me.

I force myself to be as kind as possible, to not try and pry a laugh out of him as I usually would. He wouldn't respond well to that, as he's really not in the mood. He's grieving far too much to be for a long time. "Are you ready for this?"

He isn't. He's in too much distress. But I can tell my question offends him; he seems taken aback, and flattens his ears. "Why wouldn't I be? I've fought in more battles than you have. I'm fine!"

Even though he claims to be fine, I'll keep an eye on him. A distracted mind is never a readied one in the face of battle or any sort of contention, and I don't want him to die without me. I won't let him die without me. He's all I have; without him, I'll be left alone.

Ebonywhisker signals to us and pushes her way through the reeds that so faithfully stand before our entrance. The warriors are flanking the younger apprentices, most likely to guard us. But I don't see why. We'll soon be enveloped by enemies who are going to tear us apart, get us alone. Then we're easier to take out. So why set up a defense on the journey to the battlefield, where we won't be challenged with anything more difficult than what's to come?

Honestly, I'm terrified for this battle. We just came out of an unsuccessful one against ThunderClan, so how on earth are we supposed to recover so quickly and leap into another? It's not right. As I turn my head, I can just catch the last glimpse of Tadpolestar. Watching Orchidstar. Turning his head.

Watching me.